

Counselor Lansing's Address

(Address delivered by Hon. Robert Lansing, counselor for the state department, at Amherst alumni dinner, New York, February 24, 1915.)

In my correspondence about this dinner I was asked to say something of my work in Washington. At the same time I was given to understand that, as there were to be five speakers, the time of each would necessarily be short. Now that was a very kind thing to do, and ought to be done more often to those called upon to speak at dinners—at least for the sake of those who have to listen. However, in this case the suggestion that I talk about my work in Washington placed a limit upon my remarks. What I know most about, what I am thinking of constantly, what I am full of in fact, are the very subjects which I can not talk about.

It is my duty, as many of you know, to deal with the questions of international law and usage, which are arising every day in our relations with other countries. These questions are of absorbing interest and many of them are extremely complex because this war in its magnitude and methods is different from all the wars which have gone before. One can look in vain for precedents in many cases. In fact we have to abandon precedent, that time honored refuge of jurists and diplomatists, and lay hold of the bed rock of principle. Diplomacy today is wrestling with novel problems, to which it must apply natural justice and practical common sense.

This great conflict has introduced the submarine, the aeroplane, the wireless telegraph and new forms of explosives. It has made mechanical motive power an absolute necessity in military operations. The old strategy of surprise has given place to mobility. The petroleum products, essential to rapid motion in the air, on land, and beneath the sea, are as necessary to a modern army and navy as arms and ammunition. New devices for communication and transportation are used now for the first time in war, and new modes of attack are employed.

The result is that neutral nations have had to meet a series of problems, which have never been solved. The liability of error, the danger of unintentional partiality, and the constant complaint of one or another of the belligerents make the path of neutrality rough and uncertain.

In addition to these dangers which beset the way of a neutral, it is impossible to proceed with that deliberation, which would appear to be the part of wisdom. Things have to be done, not studied, these days. The motto "Do it now" is not a piece of advice in the department of state. It is a command. A question, which is a week old, is ancient history. Considering the customary slow and dignified ways of diplomacy, this "touch and go" method of doing business was a decided innovation, and compelled a radical change in the machinery through which our foreign affairs are conducted.

When the war began early last August the department of state, amply equipped for its work in times of peace, was forced to reorganize immediately to meet the new conditions and the enormous increase of its business. With tens of thousands of Americans in Europe clamoring to get home, with the majority of the belligerents turning over their affairs to our diplomatic representatives, with banking credits gone, and with telegraphic communications uncertain and difficult, the difficulties of the situation were staggering. New bureaus were hastily created. The departmental force with many inexperienced recruits worked days, nights and Sundays. The correspondence of the department increased tenfold. The whereabouts and welfare of probably 100,000 Americans were sought for anxious friends. Credits were established in the various European capitals and hundred of thousands of dollars were transmitted to stranded Americans abroad.

While this was going on at Washington, our embassies, legations and consulates were taxed beyond their capacity not only in caring for our people but in caring for the interests of other nations confided to them. All at once the department of state found itself the diplomatic clearing-house of the world as well as the banker, transportation agent, and medium of communication for Americans abroad. And, while these new responsibilities were thrust upon it, questions of neutral rights and neutral duties were being presented to the department every day,

which required immediate answer. That the department of state was able to meet these extraordinary conditions is common knowledge.

As to the achievements of our diplomatic and consular officers abroad I need add no word of praise. You all know how much they did and how well they did it. A more splendid example of American capacity, adaptability and general efficiency will be hard to find in our history. And let me remind you that of our diplomats in Europe who have won such universal praise, Mr. Herrick alone had had diplomatic experience, and even his had been for only a short period. Yet in their intercourse with foreign governments in these trying circumstances when everybody seemed to be suffering with hysteria, they showed a tact and discretion which measured up to the best diplomatists of any country.

And this suggests a subject, concerning which I wish to say just a word.

The newspapers have recently given a good deal of prominence to addresses and articles advocating that our diplomatic officers be brought under civil service rules in the same way that the entire consular service—thanks to President Wilson—is regulated in the matter of appointments and promotions. I must say that the emphatic opinions of some of our former representatives are rather amusing, when one considers that they would never have been appointed under civil service rules.

I won't discuss the value of their opinions, or how much weight should be given to such authorities. The trouble is that they, as well as other advocates of the system, start out on wrong premises. Chief of these, I think, is the idea that an ambassador or minister never acts independently, and his only duty is to repeat words put in his mouth by the department of state, that he has no more initiative than a consular officer. Now that idea is a common one; it is quite generally believed. If it were true, a permanent diplomatic corps would be just the thing. The fact is, it is a fallacy. Successful diplomacy requires today individual initiative and sound judgment, as it always has. It is the man of force, of originality, of personality, who becomes distinguished in the diplomatic service. On men of that character the success of the administration's foreign policies depend. They must also be men who comprehend those policies, who are in hearty sympathy with them, and who are enthusiastic and untiring in carrying them out. Now that goes a good deal beyond merely obeying orders.

Of course what I have said does not apply to the subordinate officers of the diplomatic service. I am referring to ambassadors and ministers, not to secretaries. There is no doubt in the case of secretaries competitive examinations for appointments and promotions work well. I am not sure that the system might not be extended to some of the less important missions. But, when it comes to the principal posts abroad, I am strongly opposed to tying the hands of the president in any way.

Success in diplomacy depends so much on temperament, on reputation, on characteristics which have won distinction in other fields of enterprise that it would be most unwise to restrict the presidential power. If we had obtained all our ambassadors and ministers by promotion, we would not have had such men at London as E. J. Phelps and Joseph H. Choate, or in the present crisis men like Myron T. Herrick and Brand Whitlock. Such men, inexperienced in diplomatic practice but equipped with qualities which command respect and achieve success, are the ones who have brought lustre to American diplomacy.

I realize that sometimes mistakes will be made, and that some of the untried diplomats sent abroad are failures; that is natural; but after nearly twenty-five years of more or less intimate acquaintance with the department of state I can say that the large majority—the very large majority—of our diplomatic representatives have maintained the dignity and standard of excellence, which has in the past characterized the diplomatic service of the United States.

Now what I have said will not, I know, meet with the approval of all of you. The idea of competitive examinations for public service is pretty deeply embedded in popular favor. It has in a measure prevented public office from being the victim of favoritism. But it should not go too far. The president is responsible to the people for the conduct of our foreign affairs. He

should be free to choose his agents where he will. They should be his friends, and in full harmony with the ideas and aspirations of his administration, who have a personal interest in carrying out the president's will.

I have used up a good deal of my time in discussing this subject of diplomatic appointments because I feel very strongly the injustice of the criticisms which have been made of the president and Secretary Bryan in regard to their failure to retain in the posts abroad men who were named by former administrations and who could not be expected to give hearty support to policies with which they had no sympathy.

You may think that I have adopted too serious a vein for an occasion of this sort, when we are celebrating the glories of old Amherst and listening to the good old songs which we can never forget. But, men of Amherst, these are critical days for our country; how critical only those who are in intimate touch with affairs can fully realize. It is a time for serious thought, a time of anxiety. The greatest war of all history is being waged with a disregard for human life and a ferocity unparalleled in the annals of war. Nations seem to have returned to primitive barbarism. Rights of individuals and of nations are swept aside in this gigantic struggle which is devastating all Europe. Neutrals as well as belligerents are bearing the burden. The commercial and industrial life of the whole world is affected.

My friends, as we sit here enjoying the pleasures of the table, with our hearts lightened by memories of our college days and warmed by affection for our Alma Mater, who can forget the trenches of northern France, where hundreds of thousands of our fellow men are enduring inconceivable sufferings? Who can forget the wounded and dead in the snows of Poland, or the innocent victims starving midst the ruins of their homes in Belgium and Galicia.

Could there be a more striking contrast? This assemblage in luxurious surroundings with the spirit of old Amherst inspiring good fellowship and genial thoughts; and the host of gaunt, haggard soldiers in their narrow trenches awaiting death with a fortitude which neither hunger nor cold is able to lessen, much less conquer.

It is the contrast of a people at peace and a people at war. Never have the nations witnessed so unanswerable an argument for universal peace as the stupendous conflict which is wasting the virility and resources of the great nations of Europe. Peace should become and will become the great standing policy of the new civilization which will rise from the ashes of this war.

Today, when nations are swayed with unreasoning passion, when prejudice blinds them, when they "see red," when they misjudge their friends as well as their foes, is the time for us to avoid harsh judgment, to preserve calmness in dealing with them and to curb the natural resentment which arises when our acts are misinterpreted and we are charged with wrong motives and purposes.

As American citizens, we can not be too thankful that, in this world crisis, when the lives of nations are in the balance, when civilized standards seem crumbling, we have a president whom we can trust to deal with the momentous and difficult problems of the hour with wisdom, justice and patience, having equal regard for all and favor toward none, uninfluenced by popular clamor, unswerving in his determination to maintain the strict neutrality which this government has preserved throughout this war.

Amherst has always stood for a sturdy Americanism, for an unswerving loyalty to our country, for an abiding faith in American institutions and American ideals. That is the true Amherst spirit. That is the best gift that Amherst has given to her sons. And in these days which try men's souls, when empires are locked in a life-and-death struggle, and when the days to come bear for this country a menace as well as a promise, this spirit must be our inspiration and guide in working out our national destiny.

One of the most far reaching and important laws passed by the congress that has just adjourned will not be found listed in any of the compilations of its activities because it did not involve any political question. This was the law that aims to crush the traffic in habit-forming drugs by limiting its sale under physicians' prescriptions. It provides a means by which the revenue officers have been able to locate all supplies and to supervise their disposition. The drug habit has been increasing alarmingly among various classes, and this law is intended to put an effective curb upon an evil growing almost as great as that of drink.